

Trends in Values, the Arab Spring, and Implications for National Security Summary

Mansoor Moaddel
mmoaddel@umich.edu

The Arab Spring signifies a major departure from the pan-Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s and the radical Islamism of the subsequent decades in several important respects:

Non-Ideological and Pragmatic Orientation: While both pan-Arab nationalism and radical Islamism were ideological in nature, the Arab Spring movements are predominantly non-ideological.

The Role of the Military: From Egypt to Iraq to Syria and to Libya, the army played the central role in bringing the Arab nationalists to power and making Arab nationalism the official ideology of the state. The Arab Spring has displayed very little interest in the idea of Arab political unity.

Organizational Context: The Mosque Versus the Internet: The availability of modern communication technology, including Satellite TV, the Internet, and SMS, by undermining the regimes' monopoly control of the content and flow of information, provided a new, more effective, and ideologically neutral context for networking and communication among political activists. This in turn has reduced the significance of the religious network and rituals for political mobilization, factors that had a conservative impact on the outlooks of the people involved.

Support for Democracy Versus Islamic Government: The available survey data have shown a significant decline in support for political Islam, and an increase in secular politics, national identity as opposed to Islamic identity, and social individualism. There have also been some changes in attitudes toward gender equality.

The Arab Spring thus appears to have caused a shift in the attention span of young Muslim activists from violence to the nuts and bolts of realpolitik. This shift is in fact one of the most important developments in Arab countries in the past decades, having enormous positive implications for U.S. national security. Political activists and politicians may still display serious disagreements with the U.S. policies in the region. Nonetheless, the likelihood that these disagreements will be translated into violence against the U.S. or its allies is much less.

The Arab Spring also suggests a shift in policy from being exclusively regime-centered to people-centered approach. Such a policy may dictate the use of non-kinetic options under certain circumstances (e.g., Egypt) but kinetic force on other occasions (e.g., Libya), depending on the conditions of the democratic forces in the country. This policy, however, necessitates sharpening our scientific tools and skills in order to collect good-quality data. We have already identified a series of factors that correlate with religious extremism. For example, fatalism, perceived powerlessness, the feeling of insecurity, in-group solidarity, and high intra-ethnic trust are linked to religious fundamentalism. The use of satellite TV and the Internet, inter-ethnic trust, national identity, social individualism, and attitudes toward gender equality, on the other hand, are negatively linked to religious fundamentalism.

The sources of information people rely on are also crucial in shaping their sociopolitical and cultural attitudes. A more systematic focus on the digital media to understand how issues are framed, resolutions are formulated, or shortcut to knowledge is sought, and friends and enemies are identified is very important to understand and detect changes in attitudes.

Trends in Values, the Arab Spring, and Implications for National Security

The Arab Spring started on December 17, 2010, when Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, set himself on fire in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the humiliation that he felt was inflicted upon him by the municipal agents. This act of self-immolation created an uproar among Tunisians that forced its president, Zein al-Abidin Ben Ali, to flee the country. Then, like a wildfire, it moved from one country to the next until it engulfed almost the entire Arab region: on January 14, 2011, protests took place in Jordan's capital and other major cities that were triggered by deteriorating economic conditions and inspired by events in Tunisia. On January 25, 2011, a computer-savvy Egyptian reached out to youths on Facebook to organize a protest rally in his country against police brutality, the state of emergency laws, lack of free elections and freedom of speech, and corruption in high places, leading to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. On February 15, 2011, thousands of Libyans protested after the Libyan government arrested human-rights attorney Fathi Terbi in Benghazi, Libya, leading to armed rebellion against Colonel Gadhafi, who was eventually captured and killed. On January 16, 2011, two days after the fall of Tunisian president Ben Ali, a 32-year-old mother of three in Yemen posted a message on Facebook, calling on the people to celebrate the Tunisian uprising. On February 14, 2011, inspired by the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, an anti-government rally was organized in Bahrain during which a protester was killed; and on March 13, 2011, Syrian security forces opened fire on people who had gathered in Deraa's main mosque in southern Syria to deliberate about how to respond to the arrests of a few students who wrote anti-regime slogans on their school walls.

Arab Spring versus Radical Ideologies of the Past

Appropriately labeled as the Arab Spring, these series of anti-authoritarian movements marked the dawn of a new era for the people of the Arab world. In scope, depth, and breadth, the Arab Spring has touched the lives and aspirations of the great majority of the publics in the region more extensively than the pan-Arab nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the radical Islamism of the subsequent decades. In terms of political discourse and organization, the Arab Spring signifies a major departure from these past ideological movements in several important respects:

- I. Non-ideological and Pragmatic Orientation. While both pan-Arab nationalism and radical Islamism were ideological in nature, the Arab Spring movements are predominantly non-ideological. Findings from the surveys carried out in Egypt and Lebanon last summer indicated that 84% of Egyptians and 66% of Lebanese believed that these movements were either for freedom and democracy or for economic prosperity. Only a minority of the respondents from both countries believed that these movements aimed to establish an Islamic government (9% in both countries).
- II. The Role of the Military. From Egypt to Iraq to Syria and to Libya, the army played the central role in bringing the Arab nationalists to power and making Arab nationalism the official ideology of the state. The Arab Spring has displayed very little interest in the idea of Arab political unity. While among Egyptians the popularity of the army has increased significantly and about 71% of Egyptian respondents expressed that it was very good or fairly good to have the army rule, there was little support for this rule in the other Arab countries for which data are available.

III. Organizational Context: The Mosque Versus the Internet. The disruption and destruction of the social and organizational bases of secular movements and political parties by the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world channeled oppositional activities through religion, as religious institutions and the mosques provided favorable context for networking and political mobilization. This shift in turn contributed to a further decline of secular politics and the rise of radical Islamism.

However, the availability of modern communication technology, including Satellite TV, the Internet, and SMS, by undermining these regimes' monopoly control of the content and flow of information provided a new, more effective, and ideologically neutral context for networking and communication among political activists. This in turn has reduced the significance of the religious network and rituals for political mobilization, factors that had a conservative impact on the outlooks of the people involved. If the introduction of print into the Muslim-majority countries in the nineteenth century enhanced the inflow of modern ideologies and culture to these countries, modern communication technology in the twenty-first century provided the context for the rise of the new democracy movements in the region. The available data have shown that the frequency of the Internet and PC use is negatively linked to in-group solidarity and religious fundamentalism among Iranians and Lebanese. Participations in the protest movements against the Mubarak regime in Egypt are also linked to the Internet use.

IV. Support for Democracy Versus Islamic Government. A great majority of the publics in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia have expressed support for democracy as the best form of government. Trends in values among Egyptians, Iraqis, and Saudis have shown a significant decline in support for the *shari'a*. While about 57% of Egyptian respondents said that it is very important or fairly important to have an Islamic government, when they were asked to choose between a government that implements only the *shari'a* law or makes laws according to the people's wishes, about 70% supported the latter. All in all, the available survey data have shown a significant decline in support for political Islam and an increase in secular politics, national identity as opposed to Islamic identity, and social individualism. There have also been some changes in attitudes toward gender equality.

Popular Uprising, Sectarianism, and National Security

As long as the authoritarian regimes were in power and electoral politics was fully controlled by the ruling elite, there was a degree of support for the message of radical Islamism that only through political violence and martyrdom would change be possible. As the leadership of al-Qa'ida often proclaimed, jihad was the only solution to the problem of Muslim decline: "all other methods that tried to evade assuming the burdens of jihad" were futile as shown by the betrayal of the peaceful Algerian Islamic movement, and that "the Jewish-Crusade alliance, led by the United States, will not allow any Muslim force to reach power in any of the Islamic countries." The Arab Spring, however, effectively undermined this perception. In an astonishingly short period of time, the authoritarian regimes fell by means of predominantly peaceful demonstrations.

The Arab Spring thus appears to have caused a shift in the attention span of young Muslim activists from violence to the nuts and bolts of realpolitik. This shift is in fact one of the most important developments in Arab countries in the last decades, having enormous positive implications for U.S. national security. To be sure, the U.S. is still variably unpopular among Arab countries, since close to 47% Lebanese and as high as 90% Egyptians and 80% Iraqis do

not like to have Americans as neighbors. Yet, trends in values among the Arab publics have shown that they are converging with Western values of democracy, secular politics, nationalism, and social individualism. Although this trend in attitudes is by no means uniform within and between different Arab nations, it indicates that the emergent political discourse will be framed largely in terms of moderate and pragmatic categories. Political activists and politicians may still display serious disagreements with the U.S. policies in the region. Nonetheless, there is less likelihood that these disagreements will be translated into violence against the U.S. or its allies.

Kinetic-Non-Kinetic Approach, Surprises and Warnings Capability

The rapidity with which the protest movements emerged and their effectiveness in toppling entrenched dictatorships surprised analysts and observers throughout the world. Our inability to detect the moderate undercurrents among the Arab publics was probably blindsided by our fixation on sensational acts of terrorism committed by an extremist few. We were also handicapped by a dearth of empirical data showing what was *really* happening in the region.

We still do not know which country has a higher chance of smooth transition to political stability and which one may fall into a maelstrom of sectarianism and internecine conflict. Even among the countries experiencing political stability, there is always the possibility of the rise of a populist leader who uses anti-Americanism as a ploy to gain power consolidation, a political strategy that has been systematically used by extremist regimes in the region.

Furthermore, given the general recognition that in an asymmetrical warfare an exclusive reliance on kinetic forces may not be a successful strategy against terrorism and political violence, it would be a mistake to think about strategy in terms of a choice between kinetic, non-kinetic, or a combination thereof (e.g., Libya). The Arab Spring instructs us to focus our attention on the effects of the social structures and processes on the attitudes and value orientations of the ordinary publics. An over-focus on the ability of a dictatorial friendly regime to fight terrorism may backfire. This is particularly so because many such regimes have been responsible for creating the social conditions that promoted terrorism and political violence in the first place. The rise of radical Islamism following the 1952 coup by Arab nationalists in Egypt is a prime example.

The parameters of a people-centered foreign policy may dictate the use of non-kinetic options under certain circumstances (e.g., Egypt) and kinetic force on other occasions (e.g., Libya), depending on the situation of the democratic forces in the country. Such a public policy, however, necessitates sharpening our scientific tools and skills in order to collect good-quality data. We have already identified a series of factors that correlate with religious extremism. For example, fatalism, perceived powerlessness, the feeling of insecurity, in-group solidarity, and high intra-ethnic trust are linked to religious fundamentalism. The use of satellite TV and the Internet, inter-ethnic trust, national identity, social individualism, and attitudes toward gender equality, on the other hand, are negatively linked to religious fundamentalism.

The sources of information people rely on are also crucial in shaping their sociopolitical and cultural attitudes. In fact, a more systematic focus on the digital media to understand how issues are framed, resolutions are formulated, shortcut to knowledge is sought, and friends and enemies are identified is very important to understand and to detect changes in attitudes.

Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (Capi) Techniques:

One innovative way to use modern technologies to sense, localize, and track perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior is the Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technique

widely used by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. Each interviewer will be equipped with a laptop to enter and record data, housing unit, neighborhood, and interview observation, in addition to the interview questions. Interviewers will be required to send the data daily to a central server using the Internet. This innovative method has many advantages including minimizing data-entry error, reducing interviewer error, significantly cutting down turnaround time of data output, coordinating and monitoring real-time data collection, implementing standardized quality-control measures, collecting standardized process data across to increase efficiency and quickly detect data irregularities, generating daily web-reports related to the survey process and the productivity and quality of each interviewer's work, and facilitating the implementation and control of new survey measures while data collection is underway. This includes the addition of new questions related to any major event that might unexpectedly take place. These changes could be designed and sent to the interviewers' laptops within minutes. This is an important capability to possess in such a volatile region where possible events of interest could unfold unexpectedly. Finally, such methods will facilitate the implementation of follow-up surveys to look at trends in respondent values and reactions to such events.